

Ryan McGee, *ESPN Magazine*

A soldier stands watch at the entrance to one of the U.S. Army's flashiest mobile facilities. Amid the flight simulators and climbing walls, as a drill sergeant leads a line of young men through push-ups, the soldier feels a tug on his camouflage pants leg. "Excuse me," says a 7-year-old in a Jeff Gordon T-shirt. "Can I have your autograph?"

Surprisingly, this slightly surreal scene isn't at all unusual during the race year on the midways of tracks and drag strips from Daytona to Pomona. It's just one moment on the Strength in Action Tour, an unabashed multimedia recruiting road show, the main draw of which isn't a robot demonstration or the swag offered to anyone who adds their name to the Army's mailing list. "Our showcase is those race cars," says Lt. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakley of the U.S. Army Accessions Command, the guy in charge of recruiting.

The Army has long spent generously to marry the military to motorsports. It gives \$7.4 million to grace the hood of Ryan Newman's No. 39 Chevy for 15 NASCAR Sprint Cup races. For \$3.9 million more, it hitches a ride with Top Fuel drag racers Tony Schumacher and Antron Brown, the latest phase of a relationship with NHRA that began in 1974 with Funny Car icon Don Prudhomme. The Tour -- which includes 35 motorsports stops in all -- costs an additional \$8 million.

In these tight times, though, that price tag is drawing attention on Capitol Hill. "I have nothing against NASCAR," says Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.). "But I have the Defense Department telling me it has no fat to cut while we're cutting veterans' benefits and seeing teachers and policemen lose jobs. And we're spending \$7 million to sponsor a race car?"

Recently, the six-term congresswoman introduced -- during Daytona Speedweeks, no less -- an amendment to the House budget bill that would end the military's racing sponsorships, including the Air Force's \$1.6 million investment in Richard Petty Motorsports and the National Guard's affiliations with IndyCar and Dale Earnhardt Jr., reported at nearly \$32.7 million in all. Although voted down 281-148, recruiters and sports sales forces alike fear it was only a first step toward eliminating the military's entire sports marketing effort.

Critics -- bolstered by the furor caused by the military's reported \$450,000 Super Bowl flyover (of a domed stadium) -- say there are no hard numbers to prove racing's recruiting benefits. In fact, the Navy and Marines have ended their long NASCAR affiliations, citing a lack of evidence. At the height of the recent debate, McCollum's chief of staff, Bill Harper, told the Virginian-Pilot, "I would challenge the Pentagon to give me one example of someone today in Iraq or Afghanistan who saw the Go Army car going around the racetrack and that's why they joined the Army."

General Freakley, though, disagrees. Says he: "In 2010, we got over 150,000 recruiting leads out of the sports marketing program. One third, 46,000, came from the motorsports programs. What's the alternative? A recruiter walking up and down a mall, talking to 150 people to get one person to engage. That's a waste of time and, yes, money."

The Distinguished Service Medal winner says more than recruiting is at stake. "It's also about pride," he says. "Our fighting men and women, watching and listening from ships and tents around the world, get to escape for a few hours to root for the Army cars. I know; I've sat with them. It's hard to put a price on that." In other words: No retreat, no surrender.